

Boredom Alleviation During Unstructured Time: Interviews of Finnish Joutoaika

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Abstract

This thesis studies alleviation of boredom, by studying it in the context of unstructured time, where previous studies have identified consumers to often experience boredom. Growing interest has been diverted towards the phenomena of boredom as a state and antecedents of boredom. However, research about alleviation of boredom is rare. This thesis aims to increase the body of knowledge in this gap.

To fit the context of unstructured time to the Finnish people, it was studied in the life-world of *joutoaika*. Joutoaika, roughly translating to idle time is a type of unstructured time that allows opportunities for meaningful activity, but is also shadowed by the threat of boredom, and guilt for wasting time.

Following symbolic interactionism methods, three guided introspection interviews were conducted. Based on the interviews this thesis interprets that activities for alleviation during joutoaika can be divided into two categories of *diversions* and *self-improvement*. Diversions were ineffective at alleviation and often followed with negative experiences. Self-improvement allowed a more lasting alleviation and lead to other positive experiences.

This thesis presents two transtheoretical strategies for engaging more with effective self-improvements: foregrounding meaningful activities, such as self-improvement, by increasing perceived resources for them, and backgrounding less meaningful activities, such as diversions, by decreasing perceived resources available for them.

Keywords Boredom, Unstructured Time, diversion, self-improvement, transtheoretical strategy

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Tämä opinnäytetyö tutkii tylsyyden lieventämistä tutkimalla sitä sitoutumattoman ajan kontekstissa, missä edelliset tutkimukset ovat tunnistaneet kuluttajien kokevan usein tylsyyttä. Kiinnostus tylsyyden ilmiötä kohtaan on kasvussa, etenkin olemisen tilana ja mitä tylsyyttä edeltää. Tutkimukset tylsyyden lieventämiseen ovat kuitenkin harvinaisia. Tämä opinnäytetyö pyrkii lisäämään tietoa tähän aukkoon tutkimuksessa.

Sovittaaksemme sitoutumattoman ajan konteksti suomalaisiin, tutkin sitä *joutoajan* elämämaailmassa. Joutoaika on sitoutumattoman ajan tyyppi joka sallii mahdollisuuksia merkityksellisiin aktiviteetteihin, mutta sitä myös varjostaa uhka tylsyydestä ja syyllisyydestä ajan tuhlaamisen vuoksi.

Seuraten symbolisen vuorovaikutuksen metodeja, kolme ohjattua itsetutkiskeluhaastattelua suoritettiin. Haastattelujen perusteella tämä opinnäytetyö tulkitsee, että joutoaikana harrastetut aktiviteetit voidaan jakaa kahteen ryhmään: ajanvieteet ja itsensä kehittäminen. Ajanvieteet olivat tehottomia lieventämisessä ja niitä seurasi usein negatiiviset kokemukset. Itsensä kehittäminen johti pidempiaikaiseen lievennykseen ja muihin positiivisiin kokemuksiin.

Tämä opinnäytetyö esittää kaksi transteoreettista strategiaa joilla lisätä tehokkaampaan itsensä kehittämiseen osallistumista: merkityksellisten aktiviteettien, kuten itsensä kehittämisen, tuomista etualalle lisäämällä koettujen resurssien määrää niihin; sekä vähemmän merkityksellisten aktiviteettien, kuten ajanvieteiden, työntämistä taka-alalle vähentämällä niihin saatavilla olevia koettujen resurssien määrää.

Avainsanat Tylsyys, sitoutumaton aika, ajanviete, itsensä kehittäminen

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Boredom, one of the most hated human experiences and yet one deceptively common (Bargdill, 2000; Fahlman, Mercer, Gaskovski, Eastwood, & Eastwood, 2009). Research in boredom has gained an increase of interest in the past decades, but the phenomenon is still fairly poorly understood. Especially alleviation of boredom in consumer contexts has yet to receive much attention. (Martin, Sadlo, & Stew, 2006) Martin, Sadlo and Stew (2006) identified that people often experience boredom during *unstructured time*, i.e. when they are not tied to pre-determined activities. This thesis studies alleviation of boredom, by studying it in the context of unstructured time with existential phenomenological interviews. To fit the context to the Finnish life-world (Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989), the interviews were focused to *joutoaika*, a type of unconstructed time familiar to Finnish people.

This thesis presents narratives from *joutoaika*, a description of how the life-world of *joutoaika* is formed and how the life-world relates to the perceived activities through the theory of affordances (Rietveld & Kiverstein, 2014). Furthermore, this thesis confirms earlier finding that *diversions* seem ineffective at long-term alleviation of boredom (Martin, Sadlo, & Stew, 2006), while arguing that activities that can be interpreted as *self-improvement* give a more lasting alleviation. Finally this research presents two transtheoretical strategies consumers could use to engage with the more effective self-improvement.

1.1 Context

Previous studies reveal that boredom is often experienced in the context of unstructured time, especially at home (Martin, Sadlo, & Stew, 2006). To fit the context of unstructured time to the life-world of Finnish people, I focused the interviews to a Finnish type of unstructured time *joutoaika*. *Joutoaika* is a Finnish word that roughly translates to idle time but holds some special cultural meanings, described in the findings.

1.2 Theory

Theories for the antecedents of boredom theories can be divided into four groups: *arousal*, *attention*, *existential*, and *meaning theories* (Fahlman, Mercer-Lynn, Flora, & Eastwood, 2013; Barbalet, 1999; Fahlman, Mercer, Gaskovski, Eastwood, & Eastwood, 2009).

Arousal theories argue that non-optimal arousal causes boredom (e.g. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Di Muro & Murray, 2012)). *Attention theories* argue that boredom is caused by a person's inability to hold concentration in the current situation, leading to disengagement (e.g. (Fisher, 1993)). *Existential theories* argue that boredom is caused by lack of meaning or purpose in life (e.g. (Bargdill, 2000; Fahlman, Mercer, Gaskovski, Eastwood, & Eastwood, 2009)). *Meaning theories* look at boredom in a way that flows through the hierarchy of arousal, attention and existential theory: boredom is lack of subjective meaning in the available symbolic interactions (Barbalet, 1999; Flint, 2006; Solomon, 1983).

However, even though there is a growing body of research on the antecedents and experience of boredom, studies describing strategies for alleviating boredom are rare (Martin, Sadlo, & Stew, 2006). Despite the varying success, the interviews by Martin et al. (2006) show that consumers consume a wide variety of physical and digital products with the goal of alleviating boredom. This study aims to add to the body of knowledge on different alleviation tactics and strategies.

1.3 Findings and Contributions

Based on the findings of the interviews, this thesis argues that what activities people engage in in the life-world of *joutoaika*, relate to three themes: *joutoaika*, the expectations and opportunities it presents; *perceived resources*, object and mental resources perceived to be available, and *mood*.

The interviewees described a variety of activities they engage in during *joutoaika*. From the descriptions of the experiences during the engagement and following them, it was interpreted that they belong to two categories: *diversions* and *self-improvement*. Supporting the findings of (Martin, Sadlo, & Stew, 2006), diversions were described to be followed with negative experiences and were ineffective at alleviation. Self-improvements were more effective, but more difficult to start and keep engaging with.

Based on the findings, this thesis presents two transtheoretical strategies for alleviation during unstructured time: foregrounding meaningful activities, such as self-improvements, by increasing perceived resources available for them; and backgrounding activities with less meaning, such as diversions, by reducing perceived resources available to them.

Boredom is described as one of the most hated feelings a person can experience (Fahlman et al. (2009)), therefore it is no surprise that on the pallet of emotions in consumer behaviour, boredom has been long acknowledged as a relevant subject (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). Marketing researchers have recognized that boredom affects consumers in branding (Karniouchina, Usley, & Erenburg, 2011; Kotler, Keller, Brady, Goodman, & Hansen, 2009) and especially services (Berry, Seiders, & Grewal, 2002). Literature also calls boredom as a motivator for consumption (e.g. (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Illouz, 2009; Molesworth & Watkins, 2014)), but boredom gets measly attention when compared to other anxieties such as fear, which has been studied more extensively (Wheatley, 1971).

As noted in social sciences, a definition of boredom can be challenging to formulate. Adam Phillips comments (1993, p. 82): “Clearly, we should speak not of boredom, but boredoms, because the notion itself includes a multiplicity of moods and feelings that resist analysis”. Barbalet (1999) comments that while boredom is a common social experience, it is rarely widely discussed or explored, similarly marketing researchers often take boredom as a given that is often left undefined or has a minimal definition. This results in multiple interpretations with varying nuances: e.g. boredom as a consequence of a lack of variance (i.e. repetitiousness) (Nordhielm, 2002) and lack of arousing stimuli (e.g. lack of excitement or limited consumption possibilities) (Di Muro & Murray, 2012; Taylor, 1994). The phenomenon of boredom itself is described as a feeling (e.g. (Belk, Ger, & Askegaard, 2003)), an emotion (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982), a mood (e.g. (Di Muro & Murray, 2012)), and a state of being (e.g. (Drolet, 2002; Faison, 1977)). There seems to be no commonly accepted definition of boredom in marketing, for its antecedents, nor a taxonomy on how consumers alleviate it. This chapter will draw from the fields of sociology, philosophy and psychology to provide a taxonomy of boredom theories.

The lack of consensus on the phenomenon of boredom was answered in a recent study by Fahlman et al. (2013) with a synthetic literature review, transtheoretical definition and development of the first full score measure for the state of boredom. Also, Martin, Sadlo and Stew (2006) did an explorative qualitative study to the antecedents, experience and alleviation strategies for boredom in the field of

psychology. Building on their work with a symbolic interaction lens (Flint, 2006; Barbalet, 1999), the following chapters will attempt to summarize the theories, antecedents, experiences and alleviation strategies for boredom.

2.1 Theories of Boredom

Fahlman et al. (2013) divide theories of boredom into distinct groups of arousal, attention, and existential theories. Moreover, we will relate these theories to the *meaning theories*.

Arousal theories, most common in marketing, argue that non-optimal arousal cause boredom. In other words, there is a misalignment between a person's capabilities or need for arousal and the available or experienced environmental stimulation (e.g. intensity, complexity, variety, the degree of challenge and temporal window). (Woermann & Rokka, 2015; Taylor, 1994; Di Muro & Murray, 2012; Nordhielm, 2002; Drolet, 2002; Faison, 1977; Csikszentmihalyi, 1975) *Attention theories* argue boredom being caused by a person's inability to concentration or be interested in the current situation, leading to disengagement. (e.g. (Fisher, 1993; 1998)). *Existential theories* argue that boredom is caused by lack of meaning or purpose in life. Giving up, trading off or failing life projects, or inability to realize actions towards their completion may lead to a long-term experience of boredom (e.g. (Barbalet, 1999; Bargdill, 2000; Fahlman, Mercer, Gaskovski, Eastwood, & Eastwood, 2009)).

Meaning theories are described to look at boredom in a way that flow through the hierarchies of arousal, attention and existential theories: boredom is a consequence of a lack of subjective meaning in the available symbolic interactions. In symbolic interactionism, objects, products or situations are not vessels that hold meaning inherently, but instead the meanings arise and evolve from the dynamic social interaction with them. Boredom is caused when the person is unable to find meaning in this social interaction, be it with the object, situation or one's existence. (Barbalet, 1999; Flint, 2006; Solomon, 1983).

2.2 Antecedents to boredom

We can divide the themes in literature for the *antecedents to boredom* into three categories: transitory boredom (e.g. bored at work, home or during commuting), chronic boredom (i.e. always bored), and almost never bored.

In *transitory boredom*, people can only perceive limited and inadequate possibilities in the current situation. The actions perceived available have *misaligned* social stimulation, repetition, or level of challenge (Martin, Sadlo, & Stew, 2006; Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Di Muro & Murray, 2012; Woermann & Rokka, 2015). According to Barbalet (1999), misalignment might prevent sufficient meaning building. Emphasis should be put on misalignment as opposed to unidirectional excessive or insufficient stimulation. For many types of stimulation, there seems to be a subjective optimal level, which is least likely to cause boredom. For example, low information is often concluded to cause boredom (e.g. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Di Muro & Murray, 2012; Faison, 1977; Taylor, 1994)), but also, few conclude that boredom a response to an overload of information (Hamilton, 1981, p. 287). Meaning theories explain this by the low information having too few meanings to engage while too intense information causes breakdown of meanings (Loukidou, Loan-Clarke, & Daniels, 2009). An example of misalignment when realized interaction differs from cultural expectations, i.e. things are happening slower or faster than expected, is ‘drag’ or ‘rush’ as described by Woermann & Rokka (2015) which subsequently lead to boredom. In many cases, the people are not able to perceive viable meaningful actions, because they perceive that they do not have the adequate environment, energy, money, time, imagination or they are limited by rules and obligations of the situation. In the end, both structured time (e.g. work and studies) and unstructured time (home and leisure) might become boring if the people do not perceive internal or external resources for filling the time (Martin, Sadlo, & Stew, 2006).

When people stipulate that they are almost always bored, they are sometimes attributed to possess dysfunctional personality traits that make them susceptible to boredom (see e.g. boredom proneness scale BPS (Farmer & Sundberg, 1986)). Some researchers criticize this view since it would mean that a

portion of people would be unable to find alleviation for their boredom (Fahlman, Mercer-Lynn, Flora, & Eastwood, 2013; Martin, Sadlo, & Stew, 2006). Certainly, boredom susceptibility being a rigid trait would also mean that consumers with these traits would not benefit from product use. Another view is that those suffering from chronic boredom have lost life meanings (Bargdill, 2000). This loss might be the result of trading out life projects and goals, e.g. because of new obligations, injury or illness (Martin, Sadlo, & Stew, 2006). The empirical study by Fahlman et al. (2009) demonstrated that life meaning and boredom share a closer relationship than depression or anxiety. In summary, there seems to be a trait component and a social component to chronic boredom. Furthermore, there seems to be a shift from thinking that the boredom proneness traits are rigid towards boredom proneness possibly changing over time (e.g. Martin, Sadlo & Stew 2006, Fahlman et al. 2013).

The groups of antecedents for boredom above also parallel Heideggers' hierarchy of boredom (Svendsen, 2005, pp. 107-132). However, Heidegger divides transitory boredom further to what I would call object-world boredom, *being bored by*, and meaning boredom, *Dasein is bored with*. Furthest to the background, is existential boredom, *it is boring for one*. In object-world boredom, or as Heidegger (via Hammer, 2004) describes it *being bored by*, the person perceives being held in a situation and surrounded by objects that allow nothing satisfying to do. One's relationship with time is changed as it becomes apparent and stretched. This closely relates to the misaligned arousal, and disengagement of arousal and attention theories. On the second level, the object-world itself is interesting and engaging, but the person feels bored nevertheless, or as Heidegger says this *Dasein is bored with*. This parallels the meaning theory – the situation can be interesting and engaging, but without meaning, it may disengage nonetheless and turn into a bore. Furthermore, this type of boredom can be retrospective, i.e. you can realize that despite the object-world in the situation was engaging and without misaligned social stimulation, you conclude that it bored you. On the most profound level, Heidegger describes reaching a state of complete indifference, *it is boring for one*. Here 'it' being the impersonal 'it' of everything,

including *dasein itself*. This parallels the profound and depression-filled boredom described in chronic boredom¹ (Fahlman et al. 2009).

Martin, Sadlo and Stew (2006) also described a person who claimed never to be bored. This elderly lady was comfortable with spending her days with limited mobility in a small room. Positive philosophy, ability to organize time use, a wide range of interests and adaptability allowed to her to stay without experiencing boredom.

2.3 State and experience of Boredom

Just as the antecedents of boredom, the state of boredom has only recently received a comprehensive and theoretically grounded definition by Fahlman et al. (2013, pp. 69-70):

Boredom is the aversive experience of having an unfulfilled desire to be engaged in satisfying activity. In terms of arousal, the bored individual experiences either agitated, high arousal and/or lethargic, low arousal. Cognitively, the bored individual experiences a slow passage of time and an inability to focus his or her attention. Thus, boredom includes (a) lack of engagement, (b) low arousal negative affect, (c) high arousal negative affect, (d) the experience of a slow passage of time, and (e) difficulty focusing attention.

As opposed to previous definitions with unidirectional descriptions of negative affect, this is the unique definition for boredom encompassing both the high arousal (anxiety, anger, guilt, stress, restlessness, agitation, frustration) and low arousal (apathy, lethargy, tiredness, listlessness, hopelessness) negative feelings mentioned in the literature (Barbalet, 1999; Bargdill, 2000; Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Drolet, 2002; Fahlman, Mercer, Gaskovski, Eastwood, & Eastwood, 2009; Farmer & Sundberg, 1986; Fisher, 1993; Loukidou, Loan-Clarke, & Daniels, 2009; Martin, Sadlo, & Stew, 2006). Lack of engagement is widely accepted to be central to the experience of boredom (e.g. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Fahlman, Mercer-Lynn, Flora, & Eastwood, 2013; 1993). A difficulty for focusing attention is also a common, although not always present feature (Martin, Sadlo, & Stew, 2006). A slow passage of time is also often

¹ However, depression is distinct from existential boredom (Fahlman et al. 2009)

experienced (Martin, Sadlo, & Stew, 2006; Woermann & Rokka, 2015). In contrary to Spacks (1995), who claims that the English word ‘boredom’ has a relatively specific meaning, it seems both in daily and academic discourse that the word is used to describe several different mixes of certain emotions and affects. Boredom containing a multiplicity of different discourses might also explain why research on boredom has been fragmented, even contradictory.

2.4 Boredom Alleviation

Most studies have concentrated on the antecedents and experience of boredom – ways for preventing boredom. As noted by Martin et al. (2006), articles describing strategies for alleviating boredom are quite rare. In their interviews, they identified two groups of alleviation tactics used by subjects, as divided by their effectiveness. The first group included diversions, taking breaks, “switching off” and searching for new things to do. These *diversions* would soon be followed by the boredom resurfacing, sometimes feeling guiltier and more frustrated for wasting time. More effective strategies included physical exercise, practicing meditative exercises, seeking for social interaction with others and taking more control of the situation. Seeking diversions, social relationships and setting goals were also recognized by Loukidou et al. (2009). Despite the varying success, the interviews by Martin et al. (2006) show that boredom alleviation brings people to consume a wide variety of both physical and digital products and services: from drinks, exercise gear, television, and music to mobile phones and games.

This chapter will define the philosophical and methodological issues this thesis requires. The methodological discussion will be structured reflecting Morgan & Smircich (1980) five-level analysis for social science methods: (1) Ontological and (2) human nature assumptions (3) Epistemological stance, (4) favoured metaphors, – the philosophical framework of this thesis, and (5) method, its application and rigor. The first sub-chapter presents how symbolic interactionism guides the thesis and, therefore, the philosophical framework. Second the methods, application and rigor are discussed.

3.1 Symbolic interactionism within phenomenology

Within the branches of phenomenology, symbolic interactionists fall into the somewhat constructivist views of the human actor. Reality is created in the culturally adjusted symbolic interaction between human actors and objects. People are viewed as active interpreters and creators, the symbol users, of their social reality and self-concepts, not simply reactive to external stimuli. (Flint, 2006; Morgan & Smircich, 1980) The epistemological aim is to understand the patterns of the discourse (Morgan & Smircich, 1980). Objects do exist in the external world, but before the human actor focuses on them, defines and interprets them, and furthermore acts based on those interpretations, they hold no meanings. Naturally, the meanings can change, even during use. (Flint, 2006)

3.2 Application of methods

Positivist researchers criticize interpretative studies for lacking rigor, but a constructivist view is inherently incompatible with “scientific” understandings of validity, reliability and objectivity (Schwandt, Lincoln, & Guba, 2007). Instead Lincoln & Guba (1986) propose two different approaches for evaluating the interpretations. The *trustworthiness criteria* that are analogous to the scientific measures: credibility (internal validity), transferability (external validity), dependability (reliability), and objectivity (neutrality). The *authenticity criteria*, on the other hand, uses the constructs of fairness, ontological authenticity, educative authenticity, and catalytic authenticity. In addition, Lincoln & Guba describe a

set philosophical and practical suggestions for meeting these criteria, which are followed to as far as the resources of this study allow.

Purposive sampling was used to recruit three participants to the study. The aim was gathering gender-wise even set of participants of a wide age range (16 to 64). Recruitment was mostly done through personal contacts while carefully avoiding subjects who had a too direct relationship with the researcher that could have contaminated the results. An in-depth interview was conducted with each subject in Finnish, using the symbolic interactionism approach where the relationship is interactive with both members engaging in meaning making (Flint, 2006; Morgan & Smircich, 1980). To increase rigor, a short follow-up interview was conducted via phone which each subject to confirm the intended meanings of the core excerpts (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). With some subjects, an informal discussion after the interviews resulted in the researcher also engaging in interactive introspection, from which the data was recorded as a part of researcher introspection (Wallendorf & Brucks, 1993).

Previous study Martin, Sadlo & Stew (2006) found that boredom appears more often in certain contexts: structured time where the subject has compelling duties such as work or studies, but also very often during unstructured time. I chose the context of unstructured time since it, at least theoretically, allows a wider range of consumption options, and is therefore more relevant to consumer research. The interview used a starting question “how do you spent your unstructured time²?” Different consumption strategies of the interviewees were revealed and explored through guided introspection. After those strategies were revealed, I asked the interviewees to elaborate the experiences before, during and after.

Researcher Journal was recorded between December 2015 and January 2016 using a predetermined format: each note contained a short description of context (dependability) and specified the temporal nature of the description (i.e. concurrent or retrospective).

² I would estimate that word for unstructured time in Finnish ”joutoaika” has a specific cultural nuance that ”You do not have to do anything during ’joutoaika’”, meaning there is less stigmatisation for not spending it ’usefully’.

3.3 Analysis of data

The analysis method is based on Thompson's (1997) hermeneutical model of finding consumer meanings. All interviews were recorded with the participants consent and transcribed verbatim. Over a 100 themes and sub-themes were identified and coded into Atlas Ti 7.5.6. For example the following passage about unstructured time was coded under the themes 'guilt', 'wasting time', and the sub-themes 'computer', 'gaming', 'browsing the web', 'overwhelmed', 'anxiety', 'self-depreciation'

Well... let's say that there's many things you should be doing, and when you don't, you get that "I used time badly". And maybe since you've used time badly, you think that "God damn, I haven't gotten anything done. I suck". After you get the feeling that whatever and continue. And on the other hand, if you have a bunch of things to do, and you don't, you get this anxiety that there's too much and can't do it, and then you just get paralyzed and go to sit on the computer

Interviewees connected unstructured time to boredom during all interviews, but to avoid priming the subjects to specific experiences the strategies were explored in the context of unstructured time. I constructed an interactive network for all consumption strategies and the associated experiences, which could be then used for interpretation.

Commonalities were found among the activities and the experiences linked to them which made it possible to group them to two main groups: 'Diversions and 'Self-improvement'.

This chapter reports the findings of the interviews. To study the existential phenomenology of boredom I chose the context of unstructured time in which people experienced boredom in the study of Martin, Sadlo and Stew (2006). To fit the context of unstructured time to the life-world of a Finnish person, I focused the interviews into *joutoaika*, a Finnish word that roughly means idle time, but has a slightly different meaning due to the more positive connotation of opportunity for meaningful activities. From there the interviews focused on studying what forms the life-world (Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989) around *joutoaika* and three themes were the most apparent: *joutoaika* itself, *perceived resources*, and *mood*. Based on what was described under these the person would form their *field of affordances* (Rietveld & Kiverstein, 2014) for that temporal life-world and which activities they could perceive as viable and alluring. While doing guided introspection regarding the activities *in joutoaika* the narratives of experiences during and following engaging in different kinds of activities allowed them to be categorized most of them to two categories: *diversions* and *self-improvement*. Figure 1 shows how these allow the actualized meanings and form the lived experience. Finally, the interviews discussed strategies that the interviewees used to alleviate negative experiences like boredom and anxiety during *joutoaika*.

Each interview was coded quote-by-quote, with interpretations and associations related to them. Quotes were then analysed for each interview, and then across interviews. This method of coding portions of data, in this case quotes, and then comparing, analysing and processing them could be called thematic coding. From over 100 themes, five (5) were interpreted to be most significant for the discussion of boredom in the context of unstructured time across the interviews. This chapter presents the themes in the following way: First a short description of each interviewee; second the 5 main themes as cross-interview summaries in relation to their relationship with the lived experience: 1) Life-world (Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989), with the themes of *joutoaika*, *perceived resources* and *mood*; 2) the perceived field of affordances (Rietveld & Kiverstein, 2014), with the activity categories of *diversions* and *self-improvement*. Finally, this chapter presents strategies the subjects used to alleviate the negative experiences such as boredom during *joutoaika*.

Consumption experience during joutoaika

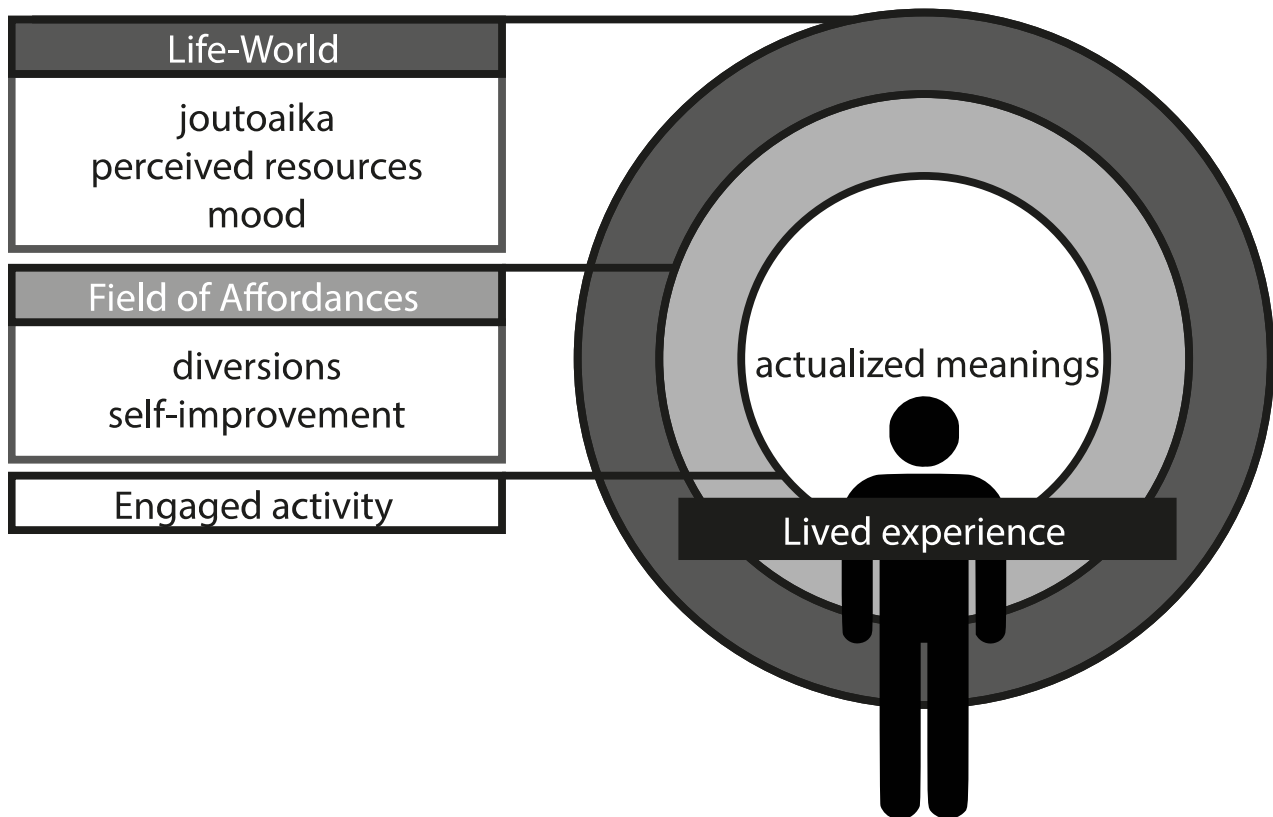


Figure 1: Lived consumption experience during joutoaika

4.1 Interviewees

This sub-chapter provides a short narrative of each interviewee. To protect the identities of the interviewees, names are changed and information which could be used to identify the individuals may be omitted. These narratives are built upon short questionnaires that were conducted when recruiting interviewees, information provided during the interview and informal conversations outside the interviews. These narratives may allow further interpretation of the themes provided by each interviewee.

4.1.1 Alistair

When the interviews were conducted, Alistair was a male, aged 24 and unemployed. Alistair had enrolled into a business university but had dropped out before getting a degree. Alistair lived alone in an apartment near the centre of Helsinki in a neighbourhood of affluent residents. Clearly his main

passion was playing the piano and he would also occasionally give one-on-one classes in addition to honing his skill with the aim of performing publicly. Overall Alistair had very little structured activities and reported to spend his unstructured time mostly at home or the nearby areas. Despite the large amount of unstructured time available, he reported only a few activities including book-reading, gaming, browsing the internet, taking walks, calling and seeing friends, and smoking. It is also notable that Alistair seemed to have spent significant amount of time doing self-reflection, and showed great interest towards popular philosophy, referring to several famous philosophers. Another notable thing is that Alistair does not own a smartphone, nor he had any profile or used any social media. Interestingly, when asked about when he was bored, he answered ‘Actually, I am bored every day’, however Alistair’s relationship with boredom was not exclusively negative, but he also reported e.g. boredom to be his greatest source of inspiration. Despite the lengthy interview, it was difficult to assess how large of a portion of his life Alistair considers himself to be bored.

4.1.2 Hanna

At the time of interviews, Hanna was a female university student, age 25, and studying pedagogical subjects while working part-time as a teacher. Hanna lived in a shared student apartment at the edge suburbs of Helsinki. Relative to other interviewees, Hanna reported to have less unstructured time: she had a lengthy list of duties due to lectures and the part-time teaching and seemed to allocate more time-slots to specific activities such as gym and studying in the library. Most intense descriptions of boredom for Hanna was during these duties and structured time-slots, especially when she perceived that the quality of education was poor at the university and when she perceived she was trying to study but failing. For Hanna, unstructured time was irregular happening occasionally during the week and between activities such as in the bus. Describing what activities she engaged in during unstructured time seemed difficult, with visiting restaurants, shopping, and using the mobile phone to read being in the foreground.

4.1.3 Tobias

When interviewed, Tobias was 25, male, and a university student in a mathematical field. Tobias also lived close to centre of Helsinki, close to one of the most expensive residential neighbourhoods in Helsinki. Tobias showed interest to wide variety of subjects in history, culture and classical music that he satisfied mainly by reading books and articles. University lectures were among his only structured activities, and even those seemed to require his presence only occasionally. He reported a fair amount of activities for his unstructured time: reading books, playing piano, composing and brewing beer being in the foreground of positive experiences. He also reported to spend a large portion of his *joutoaika* playing games with the computer and browsing the web, but had noticeably conflicted view about spending time this way.

4.2 Life-World around Unstructured Time

Surrounding the lived experience of unstructured time is its current life-world. Themes from the interviews linked to the forming of life-world of *joutoaika* have been divided into three parts: 1) *joutoaika*, where subjects describe how *joutoaika* is described by them, when they perceive it happens and how it e.g. shapes their expectations. 2) *Perceived resources*, where I present narratives that how different mental and object resources are salient to the subject and therefore inform which activities are an option. 3) *Mood*, where the findings describe how mood informs the experience, and on the other hand how the experience of unstructured time might lead to different moods.

4.2.1 Joutoaika

Tobias: Joutoaika, it's about not having any duties at the moment. There's no other way to be idle right?

In this study, I define unstructured time (UST) as a category when the person for the times when they are not tied to structured activities. A person doesn't have experiences with unstructured time itself, but instead the experiences are with the activities engaged during unstructured time, while the life-world of unstructured time surrounding the activities provides the background. In the interviews, this

categorization was given or found most often during leisure time, especially at home. In Finnish language, the word *joutoaika*, roughly meaning idle time, is used in common discourse to describe a type of UST. It should be, again, emphasized that my interpretation is that Finnish people in general seem to have positive attitudes towards that idleness of *joutoaika* than is typical in Western countries towards idleness. *Joutoaika* is not always a bore, a drab and a situation to get away from, but also might give opportunities for meaningful activities. When probed for experiences during *joutoaika*, all subjects naturally brought up boredom and two mentioned boredom in their first phrases.

Alistair: At home for sure I have joutoaika. Joutoaika especially, it sounds like some kind of better boredom. Boredom is now somehow more grand and better. Maybe the kind of boredom where you have the possibility for a cup of coffee or tea.

A person seeing themselves in *Joutoaika* is not limited to just leisure time. A person not only categorizes that ‘during that time, I will have *joutoaika*’, but a person might also find themselves to be in *joutoaika*, for example between other structured time slots such as when waiting a prolonged time for a bus or queuing for services. Instead of seeing themselves as just *being waiting* in line, they see themselves *being in joutoaika*, and might therefore have opportunities for meaningful activities.

Paraphrasing Alistair: ‘I usually have a book with me. When waiting for [Finnish social service office], it’s a great time for a good book’.

Joutoaika can be contrasted with structured time activities such as hobbies and set studying and working times, where the interviewee has pre-allocated time for a specific activity.

Hanna: For me personally, going to the gym it... it is part of my weekly schedule or daily schedule, so I don't know if that would be idle time really. But on the other hand, if I go shopping...

However, highlighted in the interviews, a person can have distinct expectations for *joutoaika* and for example his or her mood might change accordingly.

[When asked to describe feelings during unstructured time] Hanna: [If I feel that I should be doing something], nervousness, guilt, but if I have “joutoika”, then relaxation, joy, that kind of emancipated feeling, excitement... maybe boredom and creativity...

As seen in this quote, joutoika is not only an opportunity, but clouded by the threat of boredom, guilt and anxiety. As Alistair described: he has joutoika almost daily, but is also bored daily. He often wants away from that boredom, but he has written his best letters because of that boredom during joutoika.

When exploring which activities subjects ended up engaging in during joutoika, most of the reported activities could be categorized into what the interviewees perceived as diversions, or on the other hand self-improvement.

Tobias: What to I do during joutoika? I use the computer quite a lot [for playing games and browsing the internet for e.g. articles]. And then also, I read books once in a while, take walks and play the piano. I'd say those are the most important ones.

During the guided introspection of the interviews many different negative aspects were linked to engaging with diversions, while more positive aspects were described for self-improvement activities.

Tobias: Playing games is a bit... it doesn't feel like the most beneficial thing to do.

The interviews were somewhat guided afterwards to explore how and what seemed to steer the subjects into one category of the activities over the other. The subjects of this and previous studies (Fahlman, Mercer, Gaskovski, Eastwood, & Eastwood, 2009; Martin, Sadlo, & Stew, 2006) often experience boredom with similarities in the objects and situations involved. However, based on these interviews and the previous studies it seems, that during unstructured time, *perceived resources*, both mental and object, and *mood* have an impact on what activities the subject ends up engaging with and therefore the lived experience. While these two are often connected, *perceived resources* relates to the *form of life* of the person (Rietveld & Kiverstein, 2014): their environment, skills and sociocultural practices. Meanwhile, *mood* relates to *being attuned* to the situation and surrounding object-world

(Hietanen, Mattila, Schouten, Sihvonen, & Toyoki, 2016). Findings linked to themes of perceived resources and mood are presented in the following sub-chapters.

4.2.2 Perceived Resources

In the light of this study's interviews it seems that the subjects most often ended up engaging with activities that could be described either as *diversions* or *self-improvement*. A large part of which activity the subject ends up in seems to be mediated by the perceived available resources in the moment: *mental resources*, such as skills and energy, and *object resources*, such as money and tools, these communicate the available affordances to the person from which they end up engaging in.

[When discussing what leads to boredom at home] Tobias: So... umm, it feels like none of the thing that are available right now... either I don't feel like doing it or... starting that thing is a big commotion. A kind of like optionlessness, even though there are quite plenty of options. Then maybe, umm. Yeab, you just end up killing time somewhere. For example, at the computer. It is maybe... I wouldn't call it a negative feeling but... it is not positive either. It is a little something from... between.

Even though people report to face boredom when surrounded by certain objects or situations (e.g. (Martin, Sadlo, & Stew, 2006)), the affordances perceivable are different between people, and even for the same person in different times.

What was most commonly reported to bring diversions in the foreground over self-improvement was that the interviewee perceived that they did not have enough mental, physical or environmental resources for undertaking self-improvement. Generally, diversions were perceived effortless to start and continue. This was often the case even if the interviewee was conscious that the available self-improvements would lead to a better outcome, however, the key is understanding how the relative difference brings the diversions to the foreground in the field of affordances.

In addition, the findings and previous research could be interpreted to tell that consumers have limited capability for evaluating the effectiveness of consumption options for boredom alleviation. Especially in the sense of evaluating the “return on effort” for each consumption type, i.e. how a higher

effort consumption for a meaningful self-improvement can create a relatively more effective alleviation than effortless diversions.

Alistair: Exercise and music... like the two things that I know to bring me gratification. But, they are more difficult things to do than gaming. Gaming is perfect. Quite passive, it is that easy product package that you can use. A little bit as if you had guys coming to you for exercise and telling exactly which steps to take or even would move you for you. Or producing music by pressing a button or fight a bit with a monster and you get a nice melody.

In symbolic interactionism, the perceived resources are the result of interpreting external objects and internal abilities through the internal lenses. Therefore, developing the object or mental resources for the desired, in this case effectively boredom alleviating activities, could be a viable strategy to bring them to the foreground in the field of affordances.

It should be noted, that alternatively some could be said to have more mental and other internal resources to tolerate or internally alleviate boredom during unstructured time:

Tobias: Now that I think about it... a thing that would be a... boring scenario for another person... For me it is completely fine to sit on a bench for half an hour and just think about things. For me it is really easy that thing without having to have some kind of a... smartphone or something.

Another strategy reported by the interviewees was pushing diversions to the background, by decreasing perceived resources available towards them. Alistair reported to have repeatedly deleted all games, even removed computers completely from his house with the goal of him engaging more with other activities than gaming.

Alistair: And the first thought is that, what happens now... how to fix this situation. I just now deleted all of my computer games. All of that time-wasting is like deleted. And... it gives quite an anxious feeling really. When you don't have that option. It is really easy, it rewards immediately, gaming, even though nothing lasting remains. No skills either, but it is immediately really rewarding.

Well... I decided I will clean my house. Ok, that is done now. It is a thing you can do every day, but not that brainy. Then there are hobbies. Playing the piano. I found much more time afterwards.

It should be noted however that Alistair had attempted this before, but the resources and falling to gaming ‘returned by itself over time’.

[When asked if he had tried this strategy before] Alistair: I deleted [some years ago] all of them, but they had somehow returned. Friends pressuring most likely. We have just... Taylor, a friend, was just like ‘This is not ok. I want you to be a junkie too. So I will buy you this game time for this [massive multiplayer role playing game]. And this expansion, two expansions. This is over a hundred euros I am giving to you and you cannot so no’. (Using an exaggerated sheepish voice) ‘Oh, umm, ok, maybe a bit’.

But then it turns into the more passive. Nothing comes out of it. Not much remains afterwards.

In summary, there are several strategies for increased alleviation for boredom: Foregrounding desired affordances such as self-improvement, by developing internal and external perceived resources towards them seems a viable strategy. On the other hand, decreasing perceived resources available for diversions is also be viable.

4.2.3 Mood

Another theme, strongly related to the perceived resources, was the mood of the person. Described negative moods such as ‘depression’³, frustration and tiredness were more often associated with consuming diversions afterwards than when feeling positive, e.g. excited or inspired.

[Of different moods when bored] Alistair: Maybe what’s common is that... that you want away from that state. But well... it doesn’t... well it depends on what mental state you are in that moment. If you’re depressed and you wanted to do something sensible, and you then... then you get this self-loathing if you don’t do anything. But if on the other hand you are in a good mood but bored... then it’s more like ... I could go for a walk or have some activity.

³ Depression here meaning interviewee describing themselves as feeling depressed, not as e.g. a medical condition

In the way of perceived resources, a negative could make it seem insurmountable to engage with activities, which more often than not would have been types of self-improvement. Furthermore, a drop in mood during engaging with the activity, e.g. due to failing in reaching set goals was also reported to have similar effect.

Tobias: What I can say for sure is that if in the beginning, before you even start to do anything, you are not enthusiastic about it, you don't do it. But, then if you feel that 'Hey, now I would like to play [piano]', and then if it goes well, it also continues. If you are learning a new song and it's not working out, [...] then it might be that you start doing something else in between. Maybe a bit of frustration is there too.

Unstructured time itself was approached with very different expectations depending on the mood. In a tired, low-energy, 'after a bad day' –mood, unstructured time was expected as a dreadful chore of filling up or passing the time. When energized and in a good mood, there was excitement and inspiration towards the opportunities that unstructured time could offer. Depending on the perceived resources and mood the field of affordances offered vastly different activities as perceivable options.

4.3 Foregrounding in the Field of Affordances During Unstructured Time

Different consumption activities in the foreground of the field of affordances during unstructured time could be divided into two distinct groups according to described experiences during and following consumption: diversions and self-improvement. Even though they were both responses for 'filling up' the unstructured time, they had in many ways different associated experiences.

The unstructured time consumption presented in the narratives of this study was divided into two categories: diversions and self-improvement. Even though these categories are not comprehensive, they capture a variety of activities. The activities in each group were distinct in multiple ways, especially when it came to the experience concurrent and following the consumption.

What is brought to the foreground in the field of affordances is affected by three dimensions: broadness of scope, situation distance, and relevance (Rietveld & Kiverstein, 2014). Broadness of scope

describes what portion of attention a specific activity takes in the current situation. For example, when in a hockey rink, hockey is brought to the foreground by scope allowed by the situation. Situational distance describes how far the activity is perceived to be, both in a temporal sense of how soon it can be engaged in, and how close it is perceived to be a possibility in the environment. Finally, relevance or solicitation on tells how desired an activity is perceived to be. Relevance is affected by the perceived resources required for the activity, and the expected experiences and outcomes of the activity.

Even though the interviewees associated more positive experiences during guided introspection to self-improvement type consumption, they all engaged with diversions. Therefore, I inquired what in the life-world of unstructured time brought diversions and self-improvement to the foreground respectively. Most of the time interviewees' stories revolved around perceived resources, and mood. These themes for forming the field of affordances are explored in the following subchapters.

4.3.1 Diversions

Some activities used during unstructured time were reported to be accompanied or followed by negative experiences, most often guilt, but also anxiety and apathy. Stories of experiences with video games, browsing the internet and shopping often contained negative experiences such as these. Many of the negative feelings revolved around “wasting time”, which hit especially after the consumption was stopped.

Maybe with the computer it's just like you have nothing to do and it's the default thing to do, go sit next to the computer. I don't that often play games after all, [rather] watch some videos or read articles or something else. It's a little bit of that passive kind of using... so I don't know if it really feels much like anything. Ummm... after it... I don't know, maybe you feel like [sarcastically] “well that was time well spent”. So umm. Maybe it feels a bit... bad sometimes.

Diversions were described as e.g. passive, meaningless and annoying. When asked for reasons for engaging in diversions, they were described as easy and effortless to start. In addition, they were several times described to be the ‘default option’: something the subject starts doing when he or she has time

without even thinking. These could be e.g. sitting in front of the computer or picking up the smartphone for games or browsing.

Even if the subject had experienced the guilt for wasting time, they sometimes continued or repeated the consumption of the diversion. Again, this was credited to the ease and effortlessness. In addition, two interviewees told how the anxiety and guilt made self-improvement, socializing, duties and other more ‘demanding’ ways to pass time even more difficult:

Let's say that... there's many things you probably should be doing and since you didn't do them, you get the "I used time poorly". And maybe then, when you have used time poorly, you think that "Damn, I haven't achieved anything. I suck". Then you get that, "whatever", and just continue. If you have a lot of stuff to do and you don't, then you have that anxiety that there's too much and then you just get paralyzed and go sit next to the computer.

It could even be interpreted that there was a cycle forming from consuming diversions, leading to a drop in mood that made self-improvement even more insurmountable, leading to consuming more diversions and so on.

The narratives of negative experiences are consistent with the previous study by Martin et al. (2006), which list diversions such as playing computer games, using the mobile or internet to only provide temporary relief and leading to guilt for wasting time.

On top of the short-term negative experiences, one interviewee described how diversions might be interfering with their life-goals:

[Referring to time spent on gaming] Alistair: It's scary, because if all that time you could have been developing yourself in some way. Visited the gym a bit. Played [piano] a little more. I would now playing... the time I have spent in gaming, I would be playing at minimum in [2nd top music house in Finland]. Probably at more places too.

Giving up life-goals, as described by Bargdill (2000), adds another layer of dread that happens reflectively after engaging with diversions.

4.3.2 Self-Improvement

In contrast to diversions, Martin et al. (2006) noted that if an activity included physical exercise, the subjects would report feeling less guilty, since it could provide health benefits. The stories in this study imply that effectiveness expands to other activities that are perceived to be self-improvement for the person. Examples from the narratives include exercising, learning, practicing hobbies, and crafting produce.

Consumption activities in the interviews that could be interpreted to be different kinds of self-improvement had more positive experiences. Absence of guilt during and after was the strongest differentiator when compared to diversions. The stories described mostly various kinds of pleasures derived from self-improvement, even flow. After stopping or finishing the interviewees told that they would have a longer lasting fulfilment and feeling of calmness.

[Of playing piano] Alistair: It is more like that flow state. That you do... could do it forever. There's always something new. And it always feels quite... so fulfilling. Beautiful.

[Of brewing beer] Tobias: It creates that good feeling, that it is... that you do something there yourself, and then you get that joy when you can drink your produce. Yeah, that's that kind of positive thing

[Of visiting the library] Hanna: At least after you feel a bit relieved because you have at least done something useful.

Reported negative experiences were related to failure, either during or after. Slight anxiety was related if the exercise was expected to be too difficult. If the practice, exercise or study 'failed' it could lead to the interviewee's mood dropping, and him subsequently seeking diversions.

Hanna: Before, you might even be a bit tense if you know you're about to do a tough exercise. If you have planned a tough exercise you think 'how are you going to make it through?'

Tobias: If you're learning a new song and then it just doesn't, work, as if you can't get through some part, then it might be that you go do something else. Maybe bit of frustration is related to it.

For superficially the same activity, in this case reading, the medium greatly affected the experience during and after. While descriptions of reading articles and other content with a computer and mobile phone were similar to other diversions, reading books had very different stories.

Alistair: Rather a book. There is some sort of a greater purpose there. You read a book, and that too you can finish. You read it and then you can be satisfied that you've read a good book. Or a bad one. You can read bad books too now and then. But your life quality somehow feels better when you read more. Something like... a long thing that has been meant to be read. Like several hundred pages. It doesn't have to be anything... too philosophical every time.

In addition to the absence of guilt when reading and the satisfaction of finishing one, one person described a deeper engagement with books, even if the environment (in the bus) and the purpose of reading (entertainment and 'passing time') was reported to be the same.

[Of reading books and from mobile in a bus] Ummm.... When you read a book, you can get immersed in it more. It feels like you don't notice the time passing, the bus trip that much. As opposed to when you're reading the news [from a mobile] you notice more what's happening around you and you might... it's just a bit more something superficial, that you might be seeking something interesting.

Another feature shared by positive outcomes, was how interviewees described to finish the activity. Many of activities that lead to fulfilment had a discreet, measurable or tangible ending with meaning, such as finishing a book, a training program, getting a ready beer and finding a specific item from the shops. This is another notable reported difference between diversions and self-improvement activities that the people seemed to be stuck repeating and continuing diversions, while self-improvements usually had a discreet ending, a goal when to stop.

4.4 Summary of Findings

This summary of the findings presents key findings from the life-world of *joutoaiika* and transthoretical strategies for alleviation during *joutoaiika*.

4.4.1 Life-World of Joutoaiika

A person might find oneself in *joutoaiika* after categorizing a time-slot to be unstructured time, but also often by finding *joutoaiika* between activities and for example instead of waiting. This thesis presents narratives of a life-world under three themes: *joutoaiika*, *perceived resources* and *mood*

Joutoaiika is often approached with expectations, the excitement for the possibilities it offers, but on the other hand the dread of boredom, guilt and anxiety it might end up giving. The experience which the person ends up having seems to be strongly connected to the activities they engage with during *joutoaiika*. Most of the activities described within these interviews could be interpreted to be a *diversion* or *self-improvement* for the interviewee. Diversions were reported to be followed by guilt, anxiety, boredom and even dread for giving up life-projects. Narratives of self-improvements spoke of more positive experiences: joy, satisfaction, creativity and emancipation. Despite this, all the interviewees engaged in diversions. Which category of activities a person ended up engaging was studied through the theory of affordances, with *joutoaiika*, *perceived resources* and *mood* forming the life-world in which the field of affordances was formed, and respectively, which activities the person ended up engaging with from the field of affordances.

When finding oneself in *joutoaiika*, the *perceived resources* includes the *object resources*, such as devices and money, and *mental resources* such skills. In symbolic interactionism the person interprets these objects and skills through internal lenses, and understood the understood resources build into the field of affordances. High available perceived resources for an activity may increase the *broadness of scope* by bringing affordances to the foreground (e.g. in a library you are surrounded by books, and therefore reading books comes in the foreground), and *relevance* as activities which require a small effort relative to the available resources seem more alluring. Diversions often become very alluring due to them being readily available and requiring very little resources to engage in.

The interviewees told that depending on their *mood*, they also might approach joutoika very differently: in different positive moods, they described seeing joutoika to give opportunities for satisfying activities and making engaging in self-improvement easier. Meanwhile depressive, low-energy moods made it very difficult to engage in self-improvement and diversions become more alluring. Furthermore, the negative experiences such as boredom and guilt that sometimes follow diversions made it even more insurmountable to engage in self-improvement.

4.4.2 Transtheoretical strategies for Joutoika

Traditional methods of dealing with boredom have been said to focus on increasing stimulation and adding choices for activities to the environment (Martin, Sadlo, & Stew, 2006). Martin, Sadlo & Stew (2006) describe some of the activities consumers might use to alleviate boredom in different contexts: engaging in diversions, taking breaks, looking new things to do are common but in their study lead back to boredom. Physical exercise and meditation were among the activities that were able to alleviate boredom. This thesis argues that many other activities which the person perceives to be types of self-improvement lead to alleviation. Examples of activities mentioned in these narratives include practicing piano, brewing beer, studying, and reading books. The question is not that do people have self-improvements available (they do), but rather why they are engaging in the ineffective diversions instead. I argue in this thesis that the life-world of *joutoika*, *perceived resources* and *mood*, that communicates the field of affordances with these activities makes *diversions* more alluring several situations.

I present two viable transtheoretical to help engage in more self-improvements: *foregrounding self-improvements* to by increasing resources available for them, and *backgrounding diversions* by reducing the available resources for those activities. By doing either the person can have self-improvement activities more prominent in their field of affordances during joutoika and engage more with them. From the interviewees Alistair had already attempted backgrounding some diversions by removing all games and computers, his most conflicting diversion, and gained a period with more engagement with the more satisfying activities of self-improvement.

This thesis studied the phenomena of boredom by interviewing people's experiences in the unstructured time of the life-world of Finnish *joutoaika*. These narratives add to known strategies and activities engaged in during unstructured time. This is among the first studies to inquire consumers' boredom alleviation methods in the context of unstructured time.

This chapter goes through the theoretical contributions: First, I call for definitions of boredom to account for the multiplicity of experiences of different boredom; second, a taxonomy of boredom theory; third, contributions to theory of unstructured time and life-world of *joutoaika*; and finally, I present transtheoretical strategies on alleviation in *joutoaika*.

5.1 From Boredom to Boredoms, the Multiplicity of Boredom Experiences

One of the goals of this study was to give market researches a taxonomy of theories for the state, antecedents and alleviation strategies on boredom to help them choose appropriate theories and definitions to use in future studies.

The first fundamental challenge of defining boredom is that boredom in most cases is a *lack-of* rather than the inclusion of something. In the light of the literature review, the traditional cognition – based interpretation of what leads to boredom seems to be limited to the lack of compatible stimulation of the action and the lack of positive traits of the person (e.g. Fahlman et al. 2013). Meanwhile, lack of meanings in the engagement is proposed as the cause by some (e.g. Barbalet 1999), and lack of life meaning by others (e.g. Bargdill 2000).

The second fundamental challenge is that the discourse for boredom, both in academia but even more so in the language of consumers contains a multiplicity of distinct emotion, mood and feeling combinations (as noted by Phillips 1993). There is no denying that being bored under intense anxiety of maintaining attention as the air traffic controller (Martin, Sadlo, & Stew, 2006), boredom for being stuck on a Heidegger's empty train station, and boredom resulting from a loss of life meanings

(Bargdill, 2000) are distinct from each other, but at the same time get described under the same cry of help of 'I am bored'. By acknowledging the plurality, *boredoms*, marketing researchers can be better prepared for the different, sometimes even contradictory descriptions of experiences 'when bored'.

5.1.1 Theories of boredoms

Based on the literature review, I argue that Fahlman et al. 2013 (pp. 69-70) definition for state of boredoms is highly useful for marketing researches, and despite its cognitive focus, covers multiple of them:

Boredom is the aversive experience of having an unfulfilled desire to be engaged in satisfying activity. In terms of arousal, the bored individual experiences either agitated, high arousal and/or lethargic, low arousal. Cognitively, the bored individual experiences a slow passage of time and an inability to focus his or her attention. Thus, boredom includes (a) lack of engagement, (b) low arousal negative affect, (c) high arousal negative affect, (d) the experience of a slow passage of time, and (e) difficulty focusing attention.

It includes the aversive nature of the state of boredom, the desire to be engaged in a satisfying activity; both high arousal and low arousal negative affects experienced depending on the case; and finally, experience of slow passage of time, lack of engagement and difficulty to focus attention.

For the antecedents of boredom, three components were identified: object-world boredom, meaning boredom and existential boredom.

Object-world boredom includes what arousal and attention theories on boredom describe. The object-world can bore when there is a misalignment with the social stimulation in the activities perceived available. This misalignment might be in e.g. repetitiveness, intensity, complexity, degree of challenge, and temporal window. For most people, there seems to be an optimal level, determined by their internal resources (e.g. personal traits, preferences, skills, mood, energy) and external resources (e.g. money, time, equipment, objects environment), for each aspect of social stimulation that is least likely make the surrounding object-world boring. It should be further emphasized that acceptable levels

of social stimulation are subjective to each person and rather an area on a scale than discrete points.

Another important aspect is the situational nature of object boredom: the person usually perceives being held in the context that only provides activities with misaligned social stimulation. When social stimulation is misaligned, it makes it difficult to maintain attention and to stay engaged with the activities at hand.

For what I call here meaning boredom, Heidegger describes a person, who after being engaged in a joyous party where time flew, still concluded that the situation had bored him after all (Hammer, 2004). It is interesting how he describes the retrospective nature of meaning boredom, it is a realization after the fact that the activity was boring, which strongly aligns with the stories of the interviews.

Nevertheless, sometimes people were able also to detect the meaninglessness during the activity. Naturally, lack of meanings takes many other forms (see e.g. (Barbalet, 1999)). Based on the literature and interviews, meaning is likely even further subjective than acceptable social stimulation, with activities that create a lot of meaning to some, giving no meaning at all to others. Based on the interviews, lack of meaning seems to be connected to non-arousal negative affects of boredom, especially guilt.

On the existential level, boredom can become an all-encompassing state of being, similar but distinct from depression (Heidegger, via Hammer 2004; Fahlman et al. 2009). There are many descriptions with similarities from different fields for this state: Heidegger describes *it is boring for one*, 'it' being the impersonal 'it' of everything (Hammer, 2004); Bargh (2000) stipulates that it is caused by loss of life meanings; Martin, Sadlo and Stew (2006) describe that trading out life projects and goals could lead to this state. From a symbolic interactionism perspective, similarly to depression, existential boredom could be said hinder meaning building in the available actions.

5.2 Boredom in Unstructured Time of Finnish Jouto aika

The second goal of this study was a transtheoretical study into different boredom alleviation strategies consumer can employ. In this study, I chose to interview boredom in the context of

unstructured time, as unstructured time was often connected with boredom by Martin, Sadlo and Stew (2006). In Finland the concept of *joutoaika* describes a type of unstructured time that most Finnish people are familiar with. Compared to the closest English language translation of idle time, it seems to have a more positive meaning, possibly due to the opportunities it provides for meaningful activities.

5.2.1 Life-world in Unstructured Time and *Joutoaika*

This study further expands on the definition of unstructured time by Martin, Sadlo and Stew (2006). A person allocates time to be unstructured time (UST) when they perceive that they are not tied to structured activities. Therefore, subjects do not have experiences with unstructured time directly, but rather as a life-world that shares some of its traits across space and time. In a way, it is easier to define what unstructured time is not than what it is: the person perceives they are not tied to specific duties or activities. Naturally, UST becomes the life-world more often during leisure time, especially at home. However, it should be noted that many people allocate parts of their leisure time for specific activities, such as hobbies, and this time is not considered UST in this study. *Joutoaika* life-world may appear within and between allocated different structured time slots when the person sees that they 'have' *joutoaika*, e.g. when transitioning between activities, both in the literal and metaphorical sense. Examples of these transitions from the interviews could be riding public transportation and waiting one's turn in the civic offices. Notably, the life-world of *joutoaika* takes over from the transitional activity, e.g. waiting in line, providing with a new field of affordances that might allow more meaningful activities. This finding oneself in unstructured time might also happen in other types of unstructured time.

A notable *cultural sensibility* (Dreyfus, 1991, p. 103) could be interpreted from the interviews: even though *joutoaika* is most commonly perceived as leisure time, it could be interpreted that interviewees perceived they should be performing in a socially virtuous way. Failing to do so, in the case of these interviews by engaging in diversions, was followed with anxieties, guilt getting mentioned by all participants. This tells that the sensibility is that of a constant performance and improvement.

When following the stories it became apparent that many of the activities subjects described could be divided into different kinds *diversions* and *self-improvements*. Following this, I focused the interviews on examining what brought one category of activities over the other through the theory of affordances.

Diversions were perceived to be easy to start, thus requiring low perceived resources, and could be engaged more freely regardless of mood. However, diversions were strongly linked to negative experiences. Different types of anxieties would follow during and especially retroactively, most commonly guilt. Meanwhile self-improvement was linked to more positive experiences, but was told to require effort and a good mood so it could be engaged. Diversions and self-improvement as activity categories are further discussed in the following sub-chapters.

The stories show how the context might be approached with different *perceived resources* and *moods*, on which the person perceives available activities. This relationship between the person's perceived resources and moods to the actions was looked through the theory of affordances (Rietveld & Kiverstein, 2014).

Based on the stories, it seems that high perceived resources and a good mood, allowed people to engage in *self-improvement*, while low resources or a bad mood would lead towards non-demanding *diversions*. Negative experiences often followed diversions, especially guilt was described by all the interviewees. Even though the interviewees told how they were aware that the diversion could lead to them feeling terrible after, or even during the activity, engaging with self-improvement was perceived to require more effort, 'energy', will, and time, leading to them 'falling to the easy default' of consuming effortless diversions instead.

5.2.2 Perceived Resources

As Heidegger describes with object-level boredom, *being bored by*, the person is stuck in a situation with satisfyingly meaningful thing to do. However unlike in the 1920s, for most people in 2018 the figurative 'train-station with nothing satisfying to do' technically always has a near unlimited cavalcade of activities available through e.g. mobile devices. In Western countries we should be having a

5.2.3 Field of Affordances during Unstructured Time

It could be argued that during unstructured time most Western people have access to at least a few of both diversion and self-improvement activities. One could, for example, meditate or go for a walk, or consume media from public sources, which, in a way, require almost no external resources. However as noted before depending on your *perceived* internal and external resources, mood, and environment only certain activities are brought to the foreground and perceived viable. As noted by Martin, Sadlo and Stew (2006), traditional methods often focus on increasing choices for environment. However as presented by is in the case of depression patients it is not enough to ‘have’ affordances, one or few of them must stand out to become the focus of engaging with (Rietveld & Kiverstein, 2014). The field of affordances for an affluent person during unstructured time may very well expand with hundreds, thousands of options over the horizon, but this might just as well make it more difficult to engage with one of them than having just a few prominent affordances. Figure 2 presents simplified sketch of fields of affordances poor, rich, and prominent affordances. The illustration shows how it becomes difficult to focus on the meaningful activities unless they are made prominent by expanding their scope and relevance in relation to the meaningless affordances.

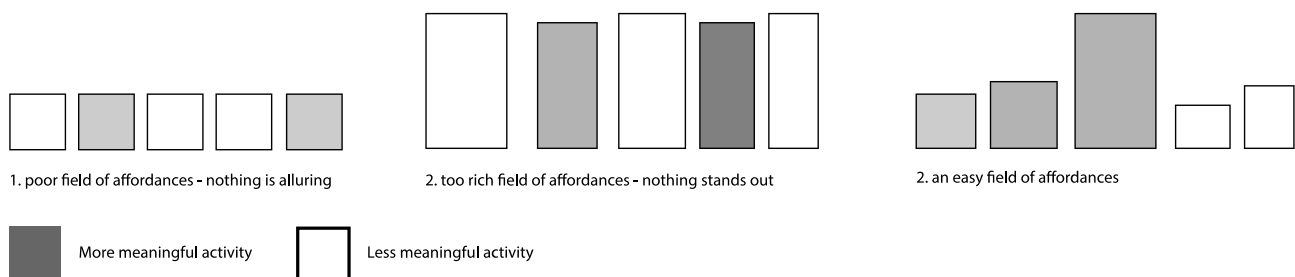


Figure 2: different fields of affordances

Furthermore, based on the interviews, I would interpret that *meaningfulness*, even though it seems to bring more alleviation, does not add to the *affective allure* of the affordance as much low perceived resources diversions requires adds. As noted before, the anxiety and guilt of engaging in diversions is retrospective, as is the longer-term alleviation of self-improvement.

These two concepts bring support for foregrounding self-improvement by increasing their affective allure with increased perceived resources. On the other hand, one can background diversions by reducing their affective allure with decreased perceived resources available for them.

5.2.4 Why Self-Improvements Alleviate Better than Diversions

Diversions were presented as a common tactic for boredom alleviation during unstructured time already by Martin, Sadlo & Stew (2006), as was their ineffectiveness. In the same study, two types of activities that could be interpreted as self-improvement were identified as effective: physical exercise and meditation. This sub-chapter adds to these observations by discussing the possible reasons through meaning theory.

Keeping in mind the definition for state of boredom having lack of engagement, misaligned arousal negative affect, the experience of a slow passage of time, and difficulty focusing attention, Fahlman et al. (2013) elaborate that the engagement aspect has two parts: *flow* (enjoyed absorption) and *meaning* (subjective significance). Well summarized in the statement “*Gaming is perfect. Quite passive, it is that easy product package that you can use*”, diversions had the right amount arousal, ease of focusing, normal passage of time, and even the enjoyable absorption. It is the meaning that is missing from the descriptions for diversions, leading to a similar experience what Heidegger described when *Dasein is bored with*: ‘I was bored after all’. It should be emphasized that these narratives are retrospective and might not reflect the concurrent experience of consumption (Wallendorf & Brucks, 1993; Blair & Burton, 1987), Heidegger specifically describes this boredom also appearing retrospectively. Reconstructing the experience may emphasize, for example, the negative affect for spending time in a perceived antisocial action.

Furthermore, in the life-world of joutoai where self-improvement is seen as an opportunity, the person might perceive that they are trading their life-projects for diversions which could lead to a long-term experience negative affect and boredom (Bargdill, 2000; Fahlman, Mercer, Gaskovski, Eastwood, & Eastwood, 2009). Many reported self-improvements were directly related to the interviewees central life-projects. From the interviewees Alistair expressed the anguish of knowing that the time spent on

diversions could have forwarded his life-project of playing the piano professionally. According to Bargdill (2000), trading life-projects gradually makes the person experience ambivalence and finally apathy and emptiness. By diverting time to engaging with self-improvement some if this could be avoided.

As a summary, the ineffectiveness of diversions for alleviating boredom might be partial to the negative experiences especially guilt; the lack of meanings; and perception of trading life-projects for diversions.

5.3 Transtheoretical Strategies for Alleviation in Joutoai

There is a growing interest towards the phenomenon of boredom, but not many studies have been done on the strategies for alleviation in consumer contexts (Martin, Sadlo, & Stew, 2006). As noted by Martin, Sadlo & Stew (2006) traditional strategies of dealing with boredom focus on increasing stimulation and choice. Instead, they propose focusing on internal causes of boredom as a possibly more effective strategy. This thesis adds to this transtheoretical body of knowledge by proposing two new strategies: Foregrounding meaningful activities such as self-improvement by increasing perceived resources for them and backgrounding less meaningful activities such as diversions by decreasing perceived resources for them.

Despite the negative experiences following diversions, and sometimes occurring during, all interviewees engaged with them. Sometimes even describing being unable to stop engaging with them. This thesis argues that this is due to high perceived allure of diversions, which brings them to the foreground before engaging. By increasing the available perceived resources towards desired self-improvement, one can increase its relative allure and have more prominent in the field of affordances. Tactics for increasing the perceived resources could include investments in objects and artefacts that lets perceive starting the self-improvement effortless and developing skills.

On the flip side, diversions can be pushed to the background by reducing their allure. Increasing the perceived resources required by adding barriers, divesting of objects they require and that bring

attention to diversions are some examples of viable tactics. From the interviewees Alistair reported to have attempted this: he pushed the diversion of gaming to the background first by deleting the games, therefore reducing the available resources and finally removing computers from his home completely that created a barrier to engaging with them. According to him, he was able to more engage with meaningful activities during this time.

As a conclusion, instead of attempting to optimize how stimulating the surrounding activities are, or accepting boredom proneness as a rigid personal trait, effort might be better diverted in changing the surrounding object-world and gaining mental capabilities which make perceiving and engaging in meaningful activities, such as self-improvement, more effortless.

This study studied boredom alleviation within the unstructured time life-world of Finnish *joutoaika*. Earlier research has recognized people to commonly experience boredom during unstructured time (Martin, Sadlo, & Stew, 2006). However, research on different boredom alleviation strategies and tactics consumers use is limited, especially in the context of unstructured time. The life-world of Finnish *joutoaika*, which roughly translates to idle time, is a type of unstructured time recognized by Finnish individuals to provide opportunities for meaningful activities, but also shadowed by the threat of boredom and guilt following from not finding meaningful activities. This study has revealed many of the activities in *joutoaika* people engage in can be divided to two categories: *diversions* and *self-improvement*. Adding on the findings of Martin, Sadlo & Stew (2006) diversions were found to be followed by negative experiences, while different types of self-improvement were more effective at lasting alleviation. This study then presents two transtheoretical strategies for gaining this lasting alleviation more often: foregrounding activities with meaning, such as self-improvement, by increasing perceived resources available to them; and backgrounding activities with less meaning, such as diversions, by decreasing the perceived resources available to those. With these contributions, this study has reached its goal of researching boredom alleviation within unstructured time.

This study also presents insight on how people *find themselves in joutoaika*. The life-world of *joutoaika* is most often, like other unstructured time, categorically allocated in advance by the person experiencing it. However, *joutoaika* life-world may also take over within and between structured time activities, when the person perceives that they ‘have’ *joutoaika*, i.e. the opportunity for meaningful activities. In this way *joutoaika* may, for example, appear and take over the experience of waiting in line, providing the opportunity for more meaningful activities.

In this research we also argue why self-improvements alleviate better than diversions. Fahlman et. al. (2013) elaborate that engagement itself has two parts: *flow*, here meaning enjoyed absorption, and *meaning*, the subjective significance. Based on the interviews diversions are usually effortless to start, and easy to get enjoyably absorbed into, therefore it must be the meaning that is lacking. As Heidegger

describes when *dasein is bored with*, the person retrospectively realizes ‘I was bored after all’. Furthermore, as *joutoaiika* provides an opportunity to advancing life-projects through the self-improvement (Bargdill, 2000), switching life-projects for diversions leads to long-term negative experiences.

6.1 Limitations, Managerial Implications, and Future Research Directions

This small existential phenomenological study is interpretive and has limitations. The small sample, both in number of interviews and timespan mean that even though the findings might appear resonant and robust within its scope, the findings cannot be held against positivist standards such as reliability and validity. All subjects were from a limited geographical and cultural background in Helsinki, therefore even though some of the findings will likely resonate with more people, I cannot claim that the findings apply even across the limited population here. Above all, the themes presented call for more research.

While this study can likely give only indirect insights to marketing management, the summary of boredom literature with the presented stories and interpretations might useful to marketing managers. First, by looking to boredom alleviation as a consumption action from the consumer’s perspective, business leaders might gain more insight into the value their product provide. The stories imply that while diversions seem to be more refined in their productization, self-improvement activities seem to provide higher, longer lasting value, meaning that there is opportunity in creating services that make highly meaningful activities like learning and playing piano, or indeed brewing beer, more effortless. Second, the categorization between diversions and self-improvement consumption might have parallels inside a company’s products or consumption demographics, which could explain differences in experiences. By understanding boredom as a context for consumption, a company can offer better services: creating self-improvement or other high-meaning products with low perceivable required internal and external resources might lead to highly engaged customers.

Moreover, this study might give consumers insights. The division between diversions and self-improvement, if found to be resonant and robust in more contexts, could provide a relatively simple heuristic to consumption choices that lead to better overall effectiveness in boredom alleviation. Finally, pushing attention from instant alleviation to expanding the fields of affordances, by building skills, mental capabilities, and changing the surrounding object-world, might lead to better long-term experiences.

While many ailments get more likely to be treated as wealth and leisure time of a population increase, boredom might become increasingly common instead (Svendsen, 2005). Moving from an object-world -limited understanding of boredom to including the meaning and existential aspects could be an improvement. This calls for development of recognition and measuring methods for the meaningfulness of an activity, and on the other hand, existential meaning a person finds.

Another call is for attention of the different ways of expanding one's affordances and their effectiveness in alleviating boredom: internally by developing skills and mental capabilities, and externally by changing the surrounding object-world.

Future research could also focus in on the experience during consumption of diversions, self-improvement and other consumption options to bring a more robust or comprehensive method of classification of boredom alleviation methods, and evidence for effectiveness.

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